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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: ATIKU - BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

REF: ABUJA 529

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Over the past few weeks former Vice President and 2007 Action Congress (AC) presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar's attempts at political maneuvering may have left him without a place in any party. Although Atiku reportedly hoped to rejoin the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party which he helped form (and under which he was Vice President from 1999 to 2007), many within the ruling party have publicly opposed his return - and have even set out to cause him public embarrassment. Moreover, Atiku's overtures to the PDP have led many within the AC to turn against him as well, undermining his grip on a party once dependent on him for funds and credibility. Given his compromised political position, Atiku may now have little choice but to join the recently announced, but still amorphous opposition "mega-party" (see reftel). Since General Muhammadu Buhari -- former Head of State and 2003 and 2007 presidential candidate of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) -- may also be leaning toward the mega-party, it remains an open question whether the two political heavyweights can work together. On April 15, Poloffs and Political Specialist met with Garba Shehu, spokesman and close confidant of Atiku, to discuss the various scenarios for Atiku's political future. Shehu also shared his bleak outlook on the prospects for electoral reform. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Recent press accounts have reported the political difficulties of former VP and 2007 AC Presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar. Following press reports that Atiku had met with former President Obasanjo to discuss his re-entry to the PDP, even one of Atiku's assistants commented to Pol Specialist that he hoped his boss "knows what he is doing." Obasanjo clearly obstructed Atiku's plans to make amends with the PDP by inviting journalists to what Atiku thought would be a private meeting, causing Atiku public embarrassment. The revelation of the meeting also deepened a rift between Atiku and a faction within the AC which disagrees with his moves to reconcile with the PDP. On April 15, Garba Shehu, spokesman and close confidant of Atiku, told Poloffs and Pol Specialist that some members of the AC are now so opposed to Atiku that they are threatening to split from the party if he remains in it. According to Shehu, this group would attempt to reconstitute the old Southwest Nigeria based Alliance for

Democracy party from the 1990s, a move which he argued would sound the death knell of the AC. Still, because of the importance of Atiku's financial backing, some within the AC remain hesitant to create any rancor with him.

13. (C) As of April 15, Shehu said that Atiku has not made a final decision yet about where he will hang his political hat. Despite press reports and the debacle of the Obasanjo meeting, Shehu maintained that Atiku's chances of returning to the PDP are "not yet closed," and claimed that Atiku still has friends within the PDP who want to work with him. On the other hand, Shehu also argued that Atiku might run for president again as the AC candidate (claiming, "The AC does not have anyone more qualified"), or as an independent, provided the electoral laws are amended to allow this. However, Shehu said that he personally believes Atiku's best bet for the future is to join the mega-party.

14. (C) Shehu told Poloffs and Pol Specialist that Atiku has met with key people from the proposed mega-party that is to be developed to counter the PDP, but did not attend the plenary. Shehu maintained that Atiku supports the idea of an opposition mega-party, since this would make it possible to challenge the ruling party through consensus, adding that Atiku has always been in favor of a two-party system. When asked how the mega-party would come together to select a single presidential candidate if both Atiku and former ANPP candidate Buhari choose to join it, Shehu said that Atiku is not desperate to be president and will subject himself to internal democracy, but questioned whether Buhari would do the same, saying that Buhari is "not prepared to have his ego

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bruised."

15. (C) On electoral reform, Shehu doubted that Atiku, or anyone, would invest the time, energy, and resources to run for office in 2011 without serious reform to the system. He believed that, at a minimum, the full list of reforms recommended by the Electoral Reform Committee were necessary. Shehu added that the United States should do more to influence Nigerian leaders on this issue. He maintained that it will take more than the "niceties of diplomacy", and "writing checks to support NGO forums" to improve democracy within Nigeria. According to Shehu, the U.S. must rally the EU and other democracies, and be prepared to "pull the ears" of the GON about reform - making open statements against corruption, and prescribing minimum standards for Nigeria to follow.

16. (C) Comment: It is highly unlikely that the current leadership of the PDP will open any doors for Atiku's re-entry to the party, as his return would be sure to disrupt the existing status quo. If he does opt to join the proposed mega-party, we find it hard to believe he will not be doing so with the intention of becoming its presidential candidate for 2011; we also find it hard to imagine that this would not be Buhari's intention as well. Throughout Poloffs' discussion with Shehu it was clear that tension and mistrust between Atiku and Buhari continues; the two of them agreed in 2006 that the opposition should pick a single presidential candidate to run against the PDP. A few months later, however, the agreement collapsed over the unwillingness of either of these proud men to stand aside for the other. If/when there is a future for this mega-party it may well depend on whether or not a solution to this dilemma can be found prior to the 2011 elections. End Comment.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
SANDERS